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Editorial

THE NEW ETHICS AND THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Very much attention in recent years has been given to the relation between the Bible and what is somewhat vaguely described as the "new theology." In so far as critical methods of biblical study have been used by pastors in the practical work of the church attention has been generally given to the intellectual problems of religious faith. The importance of setting forth religious belief in such a way that it shall not be disastrously affected by the science of our day is too evident to need defense; for unless one's religious convictions can find a positive place in one's total view of reality, religion can affect only a fraction of one's life.

THE NEW METHOD IN ETHICS

Quite as important, however, as the new theology, is the new ethics. The days when men were prepared for the practical issues of life by studying "moral philosophy" are fast passing away. In the place of the old appeals to the sanctity of the moral law or to the authority of a priori intuitions has come the method of studying human history in order to find out why human behavior is valued as it is. A recent book on modern ethics takes as a text for its discussion Bishop Butler's well-known sentence, "Things and actions are what they are and the consequences of them will be what they will be; why should we desire to be deceived?" The modern moralist undertakes a genetic study of human conduct, seeking to show just what exigencies of human life demand that certain courses of conduct be viewed with approval.

It used to be a source of great perplexity to moralists to discover

that actions which we are accustomed to call right are frequently called wrong by other races and other civilizations. The new ethics finds the explanation for these differences in the diversity which obtains in conditions of human life. In the primitive life of the clan, for example, the rights of the individual in the modern sense received almost no recognition. The sin of Achan involved innocent persons in the punishment for that sin. But our modern social consciousness feels the injustice of this ideal. It is to be expected that the moral precepts of mankind will change with changing circumstances of life.

THE PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL ETHICS

This newer point of view takes account of the vital relationship between codes of ethics and contemporary social welfare. It regards moral precepts as instruments by which the social group asserts and maintains its welfare. From this point of view it becomes impossible for a man to have an adequate moral education unless he has an intelligent conception of the nature of the social organism of which he is a member.

The new ethics then is vitally related to history rather than to abstract philosophy. It seeks to ascertain correct principles of conduct by an inductive study of the facts of human life rather than by the analysis of a philosophical ideal. It appeals to the emotional and social needs of mankind quite as much as to the formal principles of rational consistency. It leads the student to expect that each particular social exigency will demand its specific type of ethics, and it seeks to furnish reliable guidance by setting forth the inductive principles on the basis of which human conduct may be rightly valued.

IS THE BIBLE A COMPENDIUM OF ETHICS?

The older ethical teacher used, as a basis of moral instruction, some textbook which expounded the content of the moral law. A theologian who regarded the Bible as a compendium of moral precepts was thus adopting a method of instruction quite in harmony with that which prevailed in secular education. But even so, many difficulties presented themselves. What shall we say concerning the commands of Jehovah in the Old Testament to exterminate the women

and children of a vanquished foe? How shall we account for the fact that the Old Testament heroes indulged in a polygamy forbidden by our modern laws? How can we teach total abstinence from a Bible which represents Jesus as partaking of wine at feasts, and which even tells how he miraculously produced wine from water on one occasion when the supply fell short? Such are some of the questions which immediately arise if one attempts to derive the content of ethics exclusively from the Bible. Nor is this all. Not only does the Bible apparently fail to condemn practices which our own moral sense must condemn, but it also fails to mention some of the problems which are foremost in our modern life. How, for example, can a Christian gain an intelligent understanding of the issues at stake in the modern conflict between capital and labor if he simply confine himself to a reading of the Bible? How shall he gain defensible moral convictions concerning the ethics of child labor if he confine his attention to a literature which never dreamed of the possibility of modern factories and machinery? One result of the attempt to use the Bible as a compendium of ethics is to be seen in the presence in our churches of thousands of conscientious Christians who are entirely devoid of sensitiveness to those moral issues which are most real in our modern industrial and social life. It is quite possible, therefore, for one whose moral education has been derived from such a study of the Bible to believe himself to be a conscientious Christian while at the same time seeming to others to be lacking in real interest in pressing moral problems.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD OF BIBLICAL STUDY AND PRACTICAL EFFICIENCY

Critical methods of studying the Bible have arisen not so much out of a desire to promote the practical interests of the Christian life as out of the intellectual necessity of using in the realm of biblical study the same scientific tools which men are elsewhere using. Scholars who use these scientific methods are all too familiar with the reproach that they are blighting the religious life of the churches. This accusation is no more true of modern critical study than of scholastic critical study. Whenever a biblical scholar, whatever his theological attitude, devotes himself exclusively to technical questions of author-

ship and text, composition and exegesis, he cannot expect to exercise much immediate influence on the emotions and activities of men in general. The historical method of Bible-study, however, even when it is most severely technical, has this advantage over the scholastic method, that it leads theological students to study the life portrayed in the Bible in exactly the way in which the secular teacher of ethics is studying the life of mankind at large. The modern biblical scholar cannot fail to notice the way in which moral ideals grew out of specific historical and social needs. From this point of view those moral ideals in the Bible which are inapplicable today cause him no more perplexity than do the moral ideals of ancient Greece which are likewise inapplicable. The outcome of the historical method of biblical study, therefore, is to induce in the student the habit of correlating moral and religious convictions with the life in which those convictions play a positive part. As he observes the evolution of political and social life in Bible times and sees the consequent evolution of moral and religious ideals, it becomes perfectly natural for him to employ in the attempt to understand the life of his own day and generation those very principles which have proved to be fruitful in the understanding of the Bible. He is thus prepared in spirit to make a positive and efficient use of the help which social science and history furnish in the analysis and solution of our own moral problems. The general adoption of the historical method of studying the Bible will inevitably result in a greater practical efficiency of Bible students in efforts at moral and social reform.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD AND THE ETHICS OF JESUS

When one turns to the gospels one cannot fail to be impressed with the way in which Jesus taught morality directly from life rather than by the methods of the scribes. He determined what was right in any instance by examining the situation itself. When sickness needed to be healed the interests of suffering mankind were of more importance to him than the Jewish legislation concerning the Sabbath. One is to determine whether fasting is morally desirable or not by consulting the actual circumstances of life and not by appealing to some code of precepts. The method of Jesus may then be called genuinely empirical. The moral ideals of Jesus are completely in

accord with the empirical spirit of modern ethics, which would seek to determine our conduct by an intelligent understanding of the actual exigencies of human life. Thus it appears that the historical method of studying the Bible not only brings one into sympathy with modern methods of ethical investigation but also brings one closer to the spirit of Jesus himself than did the older method, which was parallel to that of the scribes. Is it not time that we should cease to apologize for this method of biblical study which has been universally adopted in our seminaries? Should we not rather recognize the latent power to be derived from it in making pastors more efficient in the practical Christian work of our age than was ever possible under the older method? Above all, is it not time that secular scholars, who are too often ignorant of the existence of any theology except that patterned after the method of the scribes, should recognize that in the pastors whose training has been secured by the newer methods of Bible-study they may find their most efficient allies in the modern warfare against the evils which are so important factors in life today? The historical method of biblical study will thus have a large share in bringing about the christianizing of our modern civilization.